



AN EMPIRICAL STUDY ON SERVICE QUALITY IN THENMALA ECOTOURISM PROJECT

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ABSTRACT

KEYWORDS:

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Eco-tourism draws heavily from the local community and their culture, and in many instances results in economic development in the area. It tries to develop the entire area surrounding the area of ecological interest, so that individuals living there and the tourists also benefit. It draws from the local population familiar with the area itself for employment purposes. It also provides alternate livelihood opportunities for the locals. Customer satisfaction is a key component in ensuring sustainability of a tourism enterprise. Customer satisfaction is a measure of how the products/ services of a company meet or surpass a customer's expectations. The study initially reviews the concept and dimensions of service quality, and the impact of service quality in tourism and customer satisfaction.

INTRODUCTION

Tourism is an essential element of economic activities around the world. It can promote the development of new emerging countries and help reduce the gap between rich and poor nations. In addition, it is also an important policy adopted in many developing nations to revive economic growth. However, development of tourism may avoidably cause some impact. Tourism impact refers to either positive or negative changes, benefits or new situations caused by a series of activities associated with development of tourism.

A few authors have proposed from the perspective of consumers that it is harder to assess service quality than product quality. They argue that perception of service quality is the gap between expectation and perception, and it is the evaluation of not only the service outcome but also the service delivery process. Therefore, with the characteristics of intangibility, heterogeneity, perishability, and simultaneity (production and consumption), service quality should be measured through other external factors.

According to previous researchers, it can be defined that service quality is consumers' subjective judgment of a service provided by the service provider (producer), according to the gap between their expectation and realistic perception of the service.

SERVICE QUALITY

Service quality has been increasingly identified as a key factor in differentiating service products and building a competitive advantage in tourism. The process by which

customers evaluate a purchase, thereby determining satisfaction and likelihood of repurchase, is important to all marketers, but especially to services marketers because, unlike their manufacturing counterparts, they have fewer objective measures of quality by which to judge their production.

Many researchers believe that an outgrowth of service quality is customer satisfaction. Satisfying customers has always been a key component of the tourism industry, but never before has it been so critical. With increased competition, and with more discerning, experienced consumers, knowing how to win and keep customers is the single most important business skill that anyone can learn. Customer satisfaction and loyalty are the keys to long-term profitability, and keeping the customer happy is everybody's business. Becoming customer centered and exceeding customer expectations are requirements for business success.

Goods quality and service quality are unlike. When purchasing goods, the consumer employees many tangible cues to judge quality such as colour, label, package, and style whereas service quality is abstract and complicated construct that is difficult to for the consumer to evaluate compared to goods quality. The characteristics of services make measurement of quality a very complex issue. Most services are intangible, that is, they are difficult to count, measure, inventory, test, and verify (Bateson, 1977). They have no physical manifestation. "Heterogeneity" (Booms and Bitner, 1981) is difficult to assure because what the firm intends to deliver may be entirely different from what the consumer receives. "Inseparability" (Carmen and Langeard, 1980) which

is composed entirely of a delivery experience, cannot be produced at one time and place and then stored for later use at another place, and that quality occurs during service delivery. Because of service intangibility, a firm may find it more difficult to understand how consumers perceive service and service quality (Gronroos, 1982).

Previously, conceptualization and operationalization of service quality (SERVQUAL) was inadequate. In the marketing literature, Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry (1985) conceived that "service quality is the difference between customers' expectation and their perceived performance of a service." Zeithaml (1988) defined service quality as "the customer's evaluation of a product's overall excellence or superiority". Gilbert and Joshi (1992) argued that service quality should be according to consumer expectations orientation, since "it acknowledges the importance of consumer behaviour in the evaluation of service". Delivery of high quality service has become an essential marketing requirement as a result of competitive pressure (Ostrowski, 1993).

Consequently, understanding and maintaining quality should be the main concerns of businesses today. Both manufacturing companies and service firms should be highly concerned with providing quality and delivery quality service (Akan, 1995). The delivery of high service quality to customers offers firms an opportunity to differentiate themselves in competitive markets, and results in greater customer satisfaction and loyalty, greater willingness to recommend to someone, reduction in customer complaints, and improvement in customer retention rates (Magi and Julander, 1996).

Today, both practitioners and academics consider the evaluation of service quality a critical measure of organizational performance (Yavas and Yasin, 2001). The delivery of high service quality to customers offers firms an opportunity to differentiate themselves in competitive markets, and results in greater customer satisfaction and loyalty, greater willingness to recommend to someone, reduction in customer complaints, and improvement in customer retention rates (Magi and Julander, 1996).

Service quality is a measure of how well the service level delivered matches customer expectations, while delivering quality service means conforming to customer expectations on a consistent basis (Joewono and Kubota, 2007). Malhotra (2002) proposed that it is not necessary to use customers' expectation to measure service quality (this study was regarding service quality of a website). Therefore, this study will directly use perceived service quality to measure the service quality of sea-kayaking operations. Consequently, understanding and maintaining quality should be the main concerns of businesses today.

BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY: THENMALA ECOTOURISM PROJECT

Thenmala Ecotourism Project is the only Wild Life Sanctuary in Kollam District situated at the foot hill of Western Ghats, amidst luxuriant greenery. The distance from Thruvananthapuram – the state capital of the 'Gods own Country' is 72 Kms and from Kollam, the District head quarters is 66 Kms. Shendurney Wildlife Sanctuary, part of Augsthamalai Biosphere Reserve owes its name to the endemic species "Gutta Travancoria" locally called "Chenkurinji". The Shendurney Wildlife was formed in 1984. The reservoir of Parappan Dam constructed across Kallada River in 1986 occupies the heart of the Sanctuary.

Thenmala Ecotourism is the first planned ecotourism destination in India. Accordingly a project for this destination has been formulated in and around Shendurney Wildlife Sanctuary with the corporation of Forest, Irrigation and Tourism Department of Government of Kerala. In order to give flexibility in management for the development of the project, a separate society the 'Thenmala Ecotourism Promotion Society' (TEPS) has also been constituted.

Thenmala offer product for both general tourists as well as ecotourists. The facilities provided for the eco-friendly general tourism are Musical dancing Fountain, Information Center, Amphitheater, Shop Court etc. The Adventure Zone include Elevated Walk way, Nature Trail, adventure activities like River Crossing, Rock Climbing, Mountain Biking etc and the Leisure zone provides a Sculpture Garden with the theme of man and nature, a Board Walk and a suspension Foot Bridge. Also Thenmala Ecotourism offers one hour boating in the reservoir of Parappan Dam which is within the sanctuary, and the tourist can enjoy and spend time at the Deer Rehabilitation Centre, Butterfly Park, and in the Aquarium of Malysya Fed.

This Ecotourism destination attracts huge number of tourists and during past years lakhs of people both domestic and foreign visited the area. The beautification and development programmes are still in progress.

The Palaruvi Ecotourism Project is only 10 Km away from Thenmala. The Palaruvi water fall, down the rocks from a height of 300 feet, and the surroundings are very beautiful picnic spots. TEPS has created primary facilities but a lot has to be done to enrich the experience of the visitors.

SERVQUAL

Service quality experience is the type of service level the customers believes he/she should receive from a service provider. When a customer visits a luxury hotel or an eco-lodge, he/she has a certain service expectation from the service provider of that hotel/ lodge. For example, when visiting an eco-lodge, a customer might expect more energy conservation measures compared with a luxury hotel. Parasuraman (1986, 1988, 1991) developed SERVQUAL, a multiple-item instrument to measure customer's expectation and perception concerning a service encounter. It consists of 22 items pertaining to expectation and perception, which are grouped under five service quality dimensions:

- *Tangibles*: Physical facilities, equipment, and appearance of personnel.
- *Reliability*: Ability to perform the promised service dependably and accurately.
- *Responsiveness*: willing to help customers and provide prompt service
- *Assurance*: Knowledge and courtesy of employees and their ability to convey trust and confidence.
- *Empathy*: Caring, individual attention the firm provides its customers.

SERVQUAL is considered a reliable instrument tool that has made an important and valuable contribution in the area of perceived service quality measurement (Fick and Ritchie, 1991). However, some questions regarding its validity, reliability and generalisability have been raised. Cronin and Taylor (1992), while acknowledging the contributions of Parasuraman, emphasized the importance of service quality and its relationship with customer satisfaction, service value and purchase behaviors' intentions. They argued that service quality should be measured as an attitude and developed the

SERVPERF scale based on performance items instead of expectations. Carmen (1990) criticized the methodology used to develop SERVQUAL, and he agreed with Babakus and Boller (1992), and suggested that both the perception and expectation items should be combined on into one scale. DeSarbo (1994) argued that the measurement measures perception and not satisfaction. They presented alternative expectancy confirmation/ disconfirmation response to measure perceived service quality.

Despite criticism that the SERVQUAL scale has been used, adapted in a variety of context in hospitality/ tourism research with its R5 values ranging from 0.5 to 0.7, its 22 items are considered good predictors of overall service quality. Fick and Ritchie (1991) examined the operation of the SERVQUAL instrument and its management implication in four major sectors of the travel tourism industry, namely airlines, hotel, restaurant and ski area service. An adapted version of SERVQUAL was used in a lodging setting (Knutson, 1990), restaurant setting (Bojanic and Rosen, 1999; Dube, 1994; Lee and Hing, 1995; Steven, 1995) and recreation setting (Howard and Crompton, 1984; MacKay and Crompton, 1998) to measure consumer's expectations consumer's service quality.

ECOSERV SCALE AND APPLICATION

This study used ECOSERV scale (Maryam Khan, 2003) to measure the service quality expectation of three Ecotourism destinations. ECOSERV was developed by Mayam Khan (2003) to measure the service quality expectations of ecotourists. Nineteen of the 22 items mentioned in SERVQUAL were used in ECOSERV. Three of the items were adapted and eight items were added resulting in 30 items. Only the expectation items were measured using a Five – point Likert type scale indicating strong agreement and strong disagreement. The overall factor loading pattern of ECOSERV appeared to be similar to SERVQUAL with a few expectations. The 'tangible' factor which was one dimensional in original scale (Parasuraman, 1988) is split into two sub- dimensions in the revised scale (Parasuraman 1991). Similarly, in ECOSERV, 'tangibles' split into two dimensions are 'eco-

tangibles' and 'tangibles', the former pertaining to facilitates and equipment that minimize environmental degradation and the later to employees and communication materials. While SERVQUAL used four items to measure 'tangibles', ECOSERV contains 11 items 'provide necessary information' was added and loaded on the assurance factor. The ECOSERV scale, after analysis revealed six factors labelled and described as:

- *Tangibles*: Materials and appearance of the personnel that reflects local influence.
- *Eco – Tangibles*: Physical facilities and equipment that are safe and appropriate to the environment.
- *Reliability*: Ability to perform the promised service dependably and accurately.
- *Responsiveness*: Willingness to help customers and provide prompt services.
- *Assurance*: Knowledge and courtesy of the employees and their ability to convey trust and confidence, and provide necessary information.
- *Empathy*: Caring, individualized attention the firm provide to its customers.

The reliability coefficient was calculated to rule out any possible variations in the ECOSERV scale. A coefficient alpha (Cronbach alpha) tests the internal consistency of the items in relation to a single trait within the instrument (Nunnally, 1978). A reliability coefficient alpha of 0.70 or higher is considered adequate for group data purposes. The obtained alpha value for the ECOSERV scale was 0.97.

SERVQUAL is an accepted scale to investigate the service quality expectation and ECOSERV is an adopted version of SERVQUAL to study the satisfaction level of ecotourists visiting ecotourism areas.

SERVQUAL consists of 22 items pertaining to expectation and perception which are grouped under five service quality dimensions: Tangibles, Reliability, Responsiveness, Assurance, and Empathy. In ECOSERV, the 'tangible' factor which was one – dimensional in the original scale (Parasuraman 1988) is split into two sub dimensions, the revised scale (Parasuraman 1991) namely 'Tangibles' and 'Eco- tangibles'.

Table showing service quality perceived and experienced level in Thenmala Ecotourism Project

Factors	Perceived		Experienced	
	Mean	Agree%	Mean	Agree %
Eco tangible	6.03	84.84	5.87	83.25
Facilities appropriate to the environment	5.98	84.34	5.78	82.35
Equipment that minimizes degradation	6.34	87.93	6.12	85.74
Facilities environmentally safe	5.76	82.15	5.10	75.58
Assurance	6.02	84.74	5.30	77.57
Feel safe in their transactions	6.30	87.53	4.99	74.48
Provide the necessary information	6.51	89.62	4.84	72.99
Have knowledge to answer questions	6.50	89.52	4.96	74.18
Instill confidence in customers	5.12	75.78	5.01	74.68
Consistently courteous with the customers	5.68	81.35	5.03	74.88
Reliability	5.96	84.14	5.89	83.44
Provide service at promised time	5.10	75.58	5.04	74.98
Promised to do services by certain time	5.68	81.35	5.63	80.85
Perform the service right at first time	6.21	86.63	6.05	85.04
Instant error – free service	6.80	92.51	6.73	91.81
Show sincere interest in solving problems	6.06	85.14	6.03	84.84

Responsiveness	5.93	83.84	5.91	83.64
Employee always be willing to help	5.01	74.68	4.91	73.68
Employee give prompt service to customers	6.50	89.52	6.01	84.64
Employee never too busy to help	6.12	85.74	5.89	83.44
Employee tell exactly when service will be	5.21	76.67	4.98	74.38
Empathy	6.01	84.64	5.71	81.65
Personal attention	6.00	84.54	5.90	83.54
Individual attention	5.70	81.55	5.45	79.06
Operating hours convenient	6.41	88.62	6.01	84.64
Understand specific needs	5.93	83.84	5.07	75.28
Tangible	6.01	84.64	5.36	78.17
Materials reflect local influence	6.21	86.63	5.99	84.44
Provide local environment	5.11	75.68	4.98	74.38
Materials visually appealing	6.01	84.64	5.60	80.56
Employees in local attire	6.12	85.74	5.89	83.44
Facilities reflect local attire	5.19	76.47	5.01	74.68
Employee in comfortable attire	5.31	77.67	5.12	75.78
Facilities in unpolluted setting	5.30	77.57	5.01	74.68
Total	5.04	74.98	4.99	74.48

*Agree % represents values of 4&5

“**Ecotangible**” dimension the mean score of 6.03 and agree % 84.84 is ranked *first* in the hierarchy of service quality, perceived by ecotourists of Ecotourism Project, Thenmala. By appropriate it means equipment and facilities that useless energy and minimize environmental degradation, the dimension was considered second in the hierarchy given the environmental awareness of the global community; business should consider adopting policies and procedure that are environmentally friendly. There are places, which in order to be environmentally conscious by the use of wind and solar energy. Practicing the 3R’s (Recycling, Reusing and Reducing) can also save energy cost. The “Ecotangible” dimension experienced by tourists stood *third* in the service quality with the mean score of 5.87 and agree % 83.25.

“**Assurance**” was the *second* important service quality for the ecotourists of Ecotourism Project, Thenmala. The mean score perceived was 6.02 and the agree % is 84.74. Assurance refers to courtesy and knowledge of employees and their ability to convey a feeling of trust and confidence by providing necessary information. This implies that in order to satisfy these travellers business should provide a service that are courteous, informative and which convey a feeling of trust. One way employees can be courteous to their guests by being nice and attractive to their need. Most of the time, using a pleasant voice and displaying a friendly smile can achieve this, but that is always enough. For example, asking the guest if they need any help with their baggage or showing them directions can also helpful. On the other hand “Assurance” experienced by the Ecotourists Ecotourism Project, Thenmala stood *sixth* in the hierarchy of service quality with mean score of 5.30 and agree % 77.57.

“**Empathy**” with the mean score of 6.01 and agree % is 84.64 was found *third* in the hierarchy of service quality perceived by the ecotourists. Empathy refers to business that have convenient hours, service that involve personal and individual attention, and where the service provider goes ‘the extra mile’ to satisfy the wishes of customers. However since 84.64 % perceived these services, effort should be made by the management to train the contact personnel to provide individual personal service to the guests. “Empathy” dimension with mean score 5.71 and agree % 81.65 stood *fourth* in the hierarchy of service quality experienced by the ecotourists.

“**Tangible**” dimension with mean score (perceived) of 6.01 and agree % 84.64 of the respondents considered it important was ranked *third* in the service quality hierarchy. In this study “tangible” refers to facilities and materials that reflect local cultural influence. For example, the décor of the restaurant or hotel, its ambience, local environment, local cuisine, employees attire etc. Atmosphere is a critical element in service, and might be the customer’s reason for choosing to do business with an establishment. Atmosphere is appropriated through senses. Use of colours, sounds and textures might attract the visitors. Facilities and its design are the tangible part of the hospitality product that the guests can see and enjoy. “Tangible” dimension with mean score 5.36 and agree % 78.17 stood *fifth* in the hierarchy of service quality experienced by the ecotourists.

Very close behind tangible dimension next (*fifth*) with the hierarchy was “**Reliability**” service quality dimension with mean score 5.96 and agree % 84.14. It refers to the services which is performed at the promised time, performed correctly, are error- free and performed with interest. The respondents expect the service to be carried out correctly at the promised time, without any flaws. For example if there is a shuttle bus service promised every hour, then it should be on time. When the service cannot be delivered to tourists on time, service provider should provide an explanation for the delay, apologize for the delay and compensate for the lack of promptness and efficiency. Consistently doing what is promised, doing it correctly and on time conveys reliability. The experienced service quality of the dimension “Reliability” with means score 5.89 and agree % 83.44 was at the *second* in the hierarchy.

“**Responsiveness**” was the *sixth* in the service dimension hierarchy perceived by the ecotourists with the mean score 5.93 and the agree % of 83.84. “Responsiveness” refers to employee’s willingness to perform a service, employee’s attitude and performance. The expectations from personal contact personnel would be to receive prompt, promised, accurate and sincere service. If the service is carried out correctly and on time, if the employer does so with a frown, it is not considered a quality service. Employees should display a sense of willingness to help guests; they should know what guests like and what they do not like. They should always put the need of the guests first and make

them feel that they are important. By using verbal and non verbal cues, they can demonstrate that they are ready to help. On the other hand “responsiveness” experienced by the Ecotourists of Ecotourism Project, Thenmala stood *first* in the hierarchy of service quality with mean score of 5.91 and agree % 83.64.

CONCLUSION

An important outcome for eco tourism provider is a satisfied customer who intends to return to the destination. Tourist satisfaction is the result of the interaction between a tourist’s experience in the destination area and his or her previous expectations about the destination. Satisfying the tourist is critical because it has an effect on the expectations and intentions for the customer’s next destination purchasing decision (Fuchs & Weiermair, 2004).

The main purpose of this study was to identify the role of service quality in tourists’ revisit and the development of tourism industry. The results from the study with respect to Thenmala Ecotourism Project showed that such dimensions

as Quality of accessibility, accommodation, venue and their components have significant, direct and positive relationship with satisfaction of tourists, their intend to return and eventually, development of tourism industry in a region.

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